Improper Use of Medications

Taking a prescription medication as directed by a doctor is generally safe and effective and is what usually happens. But lately there has been a rise in the number of older adults who are using their medicines improperly, including for non-medical reasons, and suffering the consequences. Recent reports show increased hospitalizations and visits to emergency rooms by older people involving improper use of prescription and illicit drugs.

Many older adults take medications that play an important role in treating various health conditions like pain and heart disease. Most take their medications properly, but some older adults have problems taking them the way they should. This includes unintentionally taking a medication the wrong way, as well as intentional abuse.

Unintentional Abuse

Some people accidentally take medicines incorrectly, often without knowing it or without intending to. They may forget to take their medicine, take it too often, or take the wrong amount.

As people get older, trouble with vision or memory can make it hard to use medications correctly. Taking lots of medications at different times of the day can be confusing. Another common problem is having more than one doctor who prescribes medicines, but no single doctor who monitors them and checks for any interactions.

Sometimes a big change, such as retirement, the death of a loved one, or failing health, can lead to loneliness, boredom, anxiety, or depression. That can prompt a person to begin, continue, or increase the abuse of medications or other drugs.

A person may think that taking the medicine is safe, no matter what, because a doctor prescribed it. But taking too much of a medication, or taking it in ways other than how the doctor ordered, is not safe.

Risks for Older Adults

Older adults may suffer serious consequences from even moderate drug abuse because of several risk factors. As the body ages, it cannot absorb and break down medications and drugs as easily as it used to. As a result, even when an older adult takes a medication properly, it may remain in the body longer than it would in a younger person.

Aging brains are also different than young ones and may be at greater risk for harmful drug effects (on memory or coordination, for example). Having other medical conditions (such as heart disease) and taking medications to treat them while abusing prescription drugs at the same time also present unique risks for older adults.

Preventing Medication Abuse

There are steps that you as a patient can take to prevent abuse of prescription medications and its consequences.

- When visiting the doctor or pharmacist, bring along all prescription and over-the-counter medicines that you take -- or a list of the medicines and their dosages (how much you take and how often). Your doctor can make sure your medicines are right for you and make changes if necessary.
- Always follow medication directions carefully.
- Only use the medication for its prescribed purpose.
- Do not crush or break pills.
- If you are not sure how to take a medicine correctly, ask your doctor or pharmacist. He or she can tell you how to take a medication properly and about side effects to watch out for and interactions with other medications.
- Talk with your doctor before increasing or decreasing the medication dosage.
- Do not stop taking a medicine on your own. Talk to your doctor if you are having side effects or other problems.
- Learn about the medicine’s possible interactions with alcohol and other prescription and over-the-counter medicines, and follow your doctor’s instructions to avoid these interactions.

Source: National Institutes of Health